4 everyday ways to improve your physical and mental health

By Alice Gomstyn

Has your doctor ever suggested you work out more, eat better, cut down on stress or go to bed earlier? You're not alone. Experts widely consider exercise, good nutrition, relaxation and sleep crucial to healthy living. While these so-called "four pillars" of good health help keep your body running, they also do wonders for your emotional well-being.

The key is to pay equal attention to each pillar, as ignoring one could impact your ability to sustain the others, says Dr. Gabriela Cora, a board-certified psychiatrist and a medical director for Aetna Behavioral Health. Eating foods that are heavily processed or high in sugar, for example, could leave you feeling sluggish, slow and heavy, making it harder to stay active and energized. Likewise, you may find it hard to fall asleep if you're still tense about something that happened earlier that day. "The more we balance the four pillars within our lives, the better our chances of feeling good in the long run," Dr. Cora explains.

Here's a closer look at how each pillar can impact your mood, plus simple ways to work each element into your daily routine.
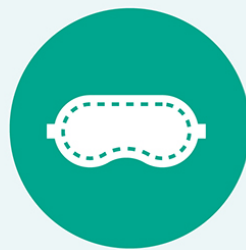
The 4 pillars of health

Taking care of your body isn't just good for your physical health – it can also improve your emotional well-being. For best results, try for a balance of these four components of wellness.

Nutrition

Exercise

Relaxation

Sleep

These pillars work together to keep your **mind and body** healthy.

Nutrition

A healthy diet promotes bacteria in the gut that helps "feel good" signals get through to the brain.

Tip: Make healthy food swaps, like trading white rice, pasta and bread for whole-grain versions.

Aim for

5

servings of fruits and
vegetables a day

Exercise

Moving your muscles
produces endorphins and
a chemical that helps the
brain deal with stress.

Tip: Walking, aerobic
exercises, weight
training, and yoga or
Pilates are all good
activities to consider
when starting a
fitness plan.

Aim for
30
minutes of
exercise a day
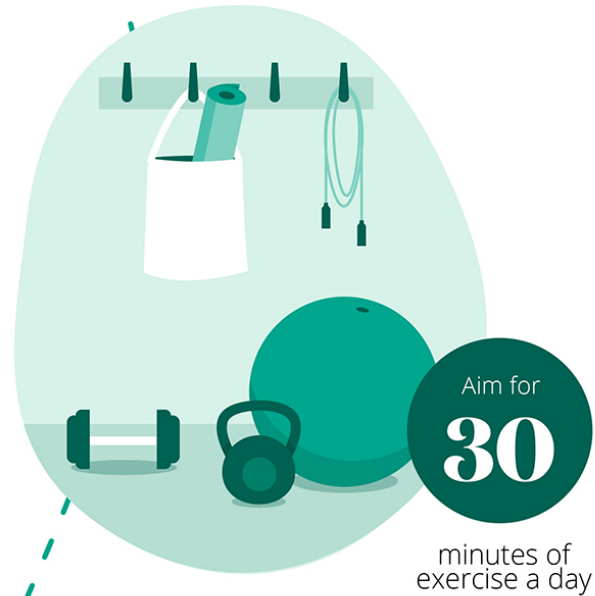
Relaxation

Mentally unwinding can
reduce stress and anxiety
as well as increase
energy and focus.

Tip: Deep breathing,
visualization and
meditation are all
effective relaxation
techniques.

Aim for
10-20
minutes of deep
breathing practice a day
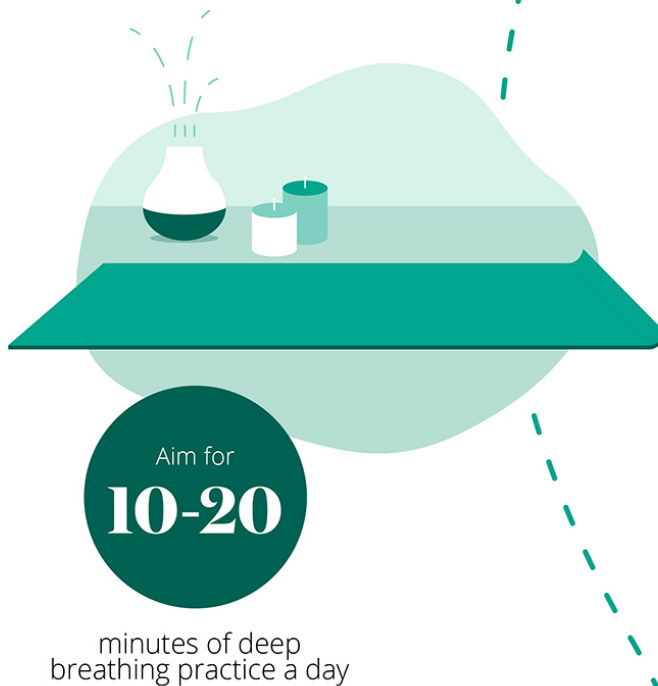
Sleep

A good night's sleep helps lower stress, improve concentration and boost emotional stamina.

Tip: Put away electronic devices an hour before bedtime. Their light can confuse your internal clock.

Aim for
7-9
hours of sleep a night
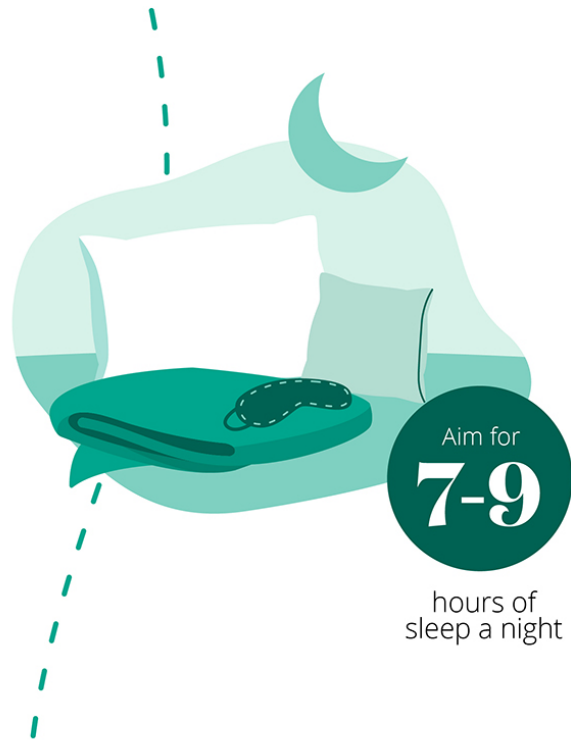
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Transcript - Infographic: The four pillars of health

About the author

Alice Gomstyn is a veteran parenting blogger and business reporter. She is an admitted sugar addict but plans to cut back on the sweet stuff and load up on veggies like never before. Bring on the broccoli!